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SUBJECT: TRANSNISTRIAN CEMETERY HONORS ROMANIAN WAR DEAD

SENSITIVE BUT UNCLASSIFIED. PLEASE PROTECT ACCORDINGLY.

REFS: A) CHISINAU 986, B) CHISINAU 872, C) CHISINAU 868

¶1. (SBU) Summary: After earlier refusals, Transnistrian (TN) authorities allowed an Embassy officer to cross into TN-controlled territory to check conflicting claims about the graves of Romanian World War II dead in Bender. A visit to the Dragalina Cemetery revealed careful and sensitive restoration, Transnistrian complaints about Romanian politicization, and some insights into getting official visitors across the line. End summary.

What a Difference Two Months Make

¶2. (SBU) On December 4, Pol-Econ Officer Michael Mates was greeted by name and with a smile at the Transnistrian "Migration Service" (part of the "Ministry of Interior") checkpoint, the final hurdle to entry into Transnistria. The welcome contrasted sharply with earlier denials of Mates and other embosfs (reftels).

The Cemetery: All Laid to Rest with Respect

¶3. (SBU) Colonel Gregoriy Vilkov, the head of the "Ministry of Interior's" public relations department, explained that the "Ministry of Interior" got the job of restoring the cemetery because the property fell under his Ministry's aegis. The Ministry put Vilkov in charge of the task because he is an historian by training. He described the site as a former dump, reduced in size from 10 to 1.5 hectares by 1970's road-building and housing construction. Because of neglect, all the headstones, some dating back to 1811, were equally derelict. With a modest but serious pride he showed us the large, ground-level black marble plaques honoring the dead, who are grouped by nation: Russians from the 19th century, French and British from post-World War I interventions against the Bolsheviks, and Russians and Romanians from World War II. A crew of five workers is restoring original headstones, some of which are broken into several pieces and lying flat, and sprucing up the rest of the cemetery.

The Romanian Graves Respected

¶4. (SBU) Vilkov showed us the plaque, written in Romanian and Russian, and dedicated "to the Romanian officers and soldiers fallen and deceased in Bender, 1941-1944, buried in this cemetery." (Note: The word "decedat" in Romanian was misspelled "desedat" on the plaque. End note.) Behind the plaque, 33 white-painted Celtic crosses, known to have commemorated the Romanian dead, were arrayed. Vilkov explained that the inscriptions had been erased, either by time or by Soviet hands. Before-and-after photographs of the Romanian headstones can be seen at the "Ministry of Interior's"

website on http://www.mvdpmr.org/index.php?option=com_tsogallery&Itemid=48&func=viewcategory&catid=13

The Romanian Authorities Dismissive

15. (SBU) The even tenor of Vilkov's remarks was broken when he showed us the letter from the Romanian Embassy in Chisinau. He described the letter with a Russian barnyard epithet and then shared its contents: after listing the 337 Romanian dead known to them, the Romanian authorities, addressing the Transnistrian authorities as "separatist elements," demanded exclusive access to and control of the site commemorating their dead, and the right to finance all reconstruction. Vilkov sharply contrasted this letter, whose contents closely follow Romanian government and press statements about the issue, with the cooperative efforts of the British and French embassies in Chisinau, and declared that the dead should be honored, and not politicized. He then extended an invitation to the opening of the cemetery (which will include a chapel and a museum, now both under construction), which is set for October 8, 2008, the 600th anniversary of the founding of Bender.

Comment

16. (SBU) We learned several lessons from this trip: that the Transnistrian authorities, at least in the case of the Dragalina Cemetery, can act with dignity and fairness, especially considering what Romanian soldiers, as Hitler's allies, did in the region in World War II. We need to persuade the Government of Romania that its image is not helped by acting contumaciously on the issue, and that its representative should be on the platform on opening day at the cemetery complex next October.

Kirby